

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE READING SITE IN
LIBERATING EXEGESIS:
MARK 6:30-44, AN ILLUSTRATION

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The Importance of the Reading Site in Liberating Exegesis:
Mark 6:30-44, An Illustration

by

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ABSTRACT

The Importance of the Reading Site in Liberating Exegesis: Mark 6:30-44, An Illustration

Reader-response methodology insists upon the importance of the reader in the act of interpretation. It is argued that the reading site, the perspective of the reader, in large part determines the meaning elicited from the text. This thesis employs liberationist readings of the New Testament to illustrate this point and to respond to the following question: When we read Mark's account of "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" (Mk.6:30-44) from the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized, what do we see? An emphasis on giving and an implicit critique of systemic injustice emerges from an exegesis of this narrative and provides relevant meaning for those located in a situation of poverty, oppression and injustice. The implications of such a liberationist reading for various social groups serves to further demonstrate the important role of the reading site. Clearly, our response to the question is a liberating one.

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It is to these people that I am most grateful for without them, this thesis would not have been started or finished.

All biblical citations in Greek are from *The Greek New Testament*, edited by Kurt Aland et al., (Stuttgart: Wurttemberg Bible Society, 1966). The Greek citations are often followed by my own English translations. In the case where English citations are given, they have been taken from *The New Oxford annotated Bible (NRSV)*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

INTRODUCTION

Questioning is a basic human activity. Bernard Lonergan would refer to it as the key to being authentically human.¹ It is natural for a person to want to know more about the world, for it is through the process of questioning that one is able to develop and grow. This holds true not only for individuals but for society as a whole. In many cases, questions may contain presuppositions or preconceptions about the world around us that in fact limit the possible responses to that question. Indeed, the question does determine the response. In order for a society to progress, there must exist new and unassuming questions; therefore, critical thinkers must be willing to challenge the norms, the existing paradigms of society. This becomes evident as we look at the development of critical methodologies in biblical interpretations.

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973). Authenticity for Lonergan is a progression of steps from experience, understanding, judging to deciding. Questioning is the key to achieving authenticity. We sense what is around us, then we question. Questions are unrestricted and exist on the levels of understanding, judging, and deciding; they help us to transcend each developmental level and ultimately to transcend the self.

The development of biblical interpretation has certainly been dependent upon the emergence of critical thinkers with challenging questions. As a result, biblical interpretive thought can be traced in terms of the focus of those questions. Only recently has that focus evolved from world, author, and text to finally reach that of the reader.

This approach insists upon the importance of the reader in biblical interpretation, and is commonly referred to as reader-oriented or reader-response. Reader-response critics claim that the reader of a text brings a particular perspective or "reading site" to the text, one that is based on personal experiences, physical circumstances and previously formulated opinions.² It is argued that the experiences we bring to a text in part determine the meaning we take from it; one's reading site influences one's interpretation of any given text.

For example, adherents of Liberation Theology within the Catholic church in Latin America interpret the biblical text based primarily on the oppressive circumstance in which many parishioners have continued to exist. Experiences of poverty, marginalization and degradation have directly affected how

² The term "reading site" is introduced by Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), Chapter One, pp.6ff. It will be explained in further detail in the first chapter of this thesis.

they interpret the Bible. They regard the biblical text, and the messages contained therein, as a liberating force - an agent of social change in the here and now. Their liberationist readings allow them to find relevant meaning in the biblical text, a text which for many others holds only abstract notions of a life after this one.

My intention in this thesis is to illustrate the importance of the reader in the act of interpretation by focusing on one particular narrative in Mark's Gospel - "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" (Mk. 6:30-44). The question I propose is this: When we read Mark's account of "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" from the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized, what do we see? The chapters to follow seek to respond to this question by defining the method of reader-response criticism and the importance of the reading site, by providing one possible liberationist reading of the narrative, and by analysing the implications of such a reading for specific social groups. More specifically, in Chapter One I intend to look at how biblical interpretation has developed to the point of reader-response criticism, to define the method of reader-response interpretation and to outline the significance of the reading site in textual analysis. Chapter Two illustrates the importance of the reading site by providing a liberationist reading of Mark's "Feeding of the Five Thousand" which emphasizes the notion of giving, the all-

inclusive extension of the 'table', and the effect of this message on the poor. Of particular interest to my liberationist reading are the subversive nature of Jesus' actions within this narrative and the emergence of implicit critiques of institutionalized injustice and inequality. Finally, in Chapter Three, I will analyse this liberationist reading to extract the implications for social justice movements which currently operate within, and therefore directly influence, the realm of Christian theology as it exists today. This chapter undertakes a discussion of New Testament readings which regard the text as a liberating force and of how this relates to racial and ethnic issues, women's issues, human rights movements and environmentalist movements.

It is my desire that by implementing a reader-response methodology, acknowledging my own reading site and applying it to a particular New Testament narrative, we may discover within the biblical text itself both an emphasis on sharing and giving and an implicit criticism of systems of exploitation. If this does occur, the implications for social justice movements are virtually endless. So, it is on this interpretive journey that I set out to find a truly 'liberating exegesis' of the text.¹

¹ The phrase 'liberating exegesis' has been borrowed from the title of Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner's text *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster / John

CHAPTER ONE

The Development of Biblical Criticism

Introduction

This chapter serves to locate the methodology of reader-response criticism, one which I will employ in my own interpretation of the Biblical text in the following chapter, within the overall development of biblical interpretive thought. Once it is located, I will stress the importance of acknowledging one's "reading site" as influential in the process of interpretation and then proceed to acknowledge my own. For only after I have acknowledged my own reading site, the perspective from which I read the text, only then can I expect my interpretation to be deemed fruitful. The position from which one reads the text often determines the meaning one discovers within the text. This recognition of the interpreter's reading site appears to be one of the most important current foci in biblical interpretation. But how did biblical interpretation develop to this point?

For the most part, the recent trend in biblical interpretation has been to follow the direction that literary-critical theory has taken. In the article "Classifying Biblical Criticism," John Barton traces the progression of

Knox Press, 1989).

biblical interpretive thought by adapting M.H. Abrams' classification model of literary critical approaches for application in biblical studies.⁴

In Abrams' The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition, he charts the rise of a new understanding of the nature of literary art both in theory and in practice.⁵ The "mirror" of the title refers to the function of art in pre-Romantic criticism, which was to reflect the external world. In Romantic theory, the poetic mind ceases to reflect and instead illuminates; consequently, the image of the "lamp" serves to illustrate a different view on the function of art, a function which Abrams described as "a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the object it perceives."⁶

Abrams summarizes these contrasting forms of criticism in the following statement:

To pose and answer aesthetic questions in terms of the relation of art to the artist, rather than to external nature, or to the audience, or to the internal requirements of the work itself, was the characteristic tendency of modern criticism up to a few decades ago, and

⁴ John Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," *JSOT* 29 (1984), pp. 19-35.

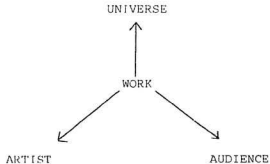
⁵ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

⁶ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, preface.

it continues to be the propensity of a great many - perhaps the majority - of critics today.⁷

Through this statement, we are introduced to four possible modes of critical theory: (1) the artist, (2) the external world, (3) the audience and (4) the internal requirements of the work itself. This is most easily illustrated in diagram form.

Diagram 1



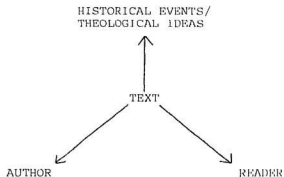
So, Abrams' classic model categorizes literary interpretive methods based on the focus of the aesthetic questions proposed, whether that focus revolves around the universe, the work, the artist, or the audience.

Barton employs a similar structure, in which he parallels these four poles respectively to historical events/theological ideas, text, author, and reader, to illustrate how one method

⁷ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p.3. Emphases added.

develops out of the other and the interconnectedness of all four.

Diagram Two



Perhaps this adaptation of Abrams' diagram is best explained by outlining the development of biblical interpretations from the time of precritical readings, to biblical criticism, to the latest emphasis in criticism to date.

The History of Biblical Criticism

1. Precritical Readings

Precritical readings of the biblical text focused on the ideas of history and theology of the text, the "historical events and theological ideas" in Barton's model, and correspond to the position of the "universe" in Abrams' model. Precritical readings of the biblical text assumed that what

was written in the text corresponded directly to reality; that is to say, the events reported in the text were thought to have actually occurred in the real world and the theological ideas presented were thought to be theological truths about God, man and nature.* This position is occupied by fundamentalists even today. The only questions posed by these precritical readers pertained to apparent inconsistencies and contradictions within the text itself.

Biblical criticism emerged when critical thinkers asked that initial question "what was the intention of the author?" -- a question which shifted the emphasis from the pole of "historical events and theological ideas" to the pole of the "author" and in effect sparked the development of biblical critical theory in general. This shift was initiated by Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who challenged the idea that the Gospels give an accurate account of the historical Jesus when he made the distinction between apostolic interpretation and the actual Jesus of history.⁹ Soon to follow Reimarus was David Friedrich Strauss who further moved the ground of

* Barton, *JSOT*, pp.23-24.

⁹ David Hawkin, *Christ and Modernity: Christian Self-Understanding in a Technological Age* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1985), pp.4-7. In chapter one (pp.3-32), the development of theological standpoints regarding the historical Jesus is traced; this includes the contributions of Reimarus, Strauss, Schweitzer and Bultmann to biblical scholarship.

supposition from the intention of Jesus to the intention of the Gospel -- that is, the intention of the work itself.¹⁰

2. Historical-Critical Approaches

Thus the "historical-critical" approach came to dominate biblical interpretation for approximately two hundred years in a quest for the original context and intended meaning. Comprised of such methodologies as source, form and redaction criticisms, all historical-critical approaches are located at Barton's pole of the author. Source criticism focuses on the literary sources, what are the author's sources? Form criticism questions the oral tradition on which the author of the biblical text relied and views the text as the product of a community; here we are still on the pole of author because the community simply becomes the author. And redaction criticism attempts to explain the editorial aspects of the text, the slant that the author has imposed upon the story. Therefore, all questions of an historical-critical nature address the author and remain focused on this pole.

Perhaps we can employ the "window" analogy proposed by Murray Krieger in which historical critics regard the Bible as if it were a window through which it is possible to see what

¹⁰ Hawkin, *Christ and Modernity*, pp.8-10.

is on the other side, to see the meaning and world behind the text, the world of the author.¹¹ They approach the text as if it could reveal truths pertaining to the author's environment and, secondarily, the world in which the story of Jesus took place. As such, the historical-critical method is essentially a "diachronic" textual analysis, meaning it looks at the text through time as opposed to a "synchronic" analysis with time.¹² That is to say, it locates the meaning of the text in terms of its historical context.

As a result of this and because all questions contain some presuppositions about the world around us which do, in fact, limit the possible responses to such questions, the historical reconstruction of the author's world and intended meaning does limit the possibilities for interpretation, for

¹¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp.3-5. Culpepper describes the image proposed by Murray Krieger in *A Window to Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp.3-4. For historical critics looking at the text is like looking through a window to see what is on the other side, in this case the intended meaning of the author(s). Other critics, such as literary critics see the text not as a window but as a mirror; the meaning of the text lies on this side of the text between reader and text. See also Norman R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p.19.

¹² Terence Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), chap.3, pp.24-39; Diachronic and synchronic, both words are of Greek origin: the base "chronic" means time and the prefixes attached to each give the words their contrast in meaning - "dia" meaning through, and "syn" meaning with.

the question determines the response. Until critics began to challenge the paradigm as set up by this method, historical-criticism dominated the field.

3. Text-Oriented Approaches

New questions began to emerge with regard to the text itself. In light of new critical theory, the focus of the interpreter began to move towards the pole of the text. Barton attributes this dramatic shift away from the author to B.S. Childs' "canonical" approach, in which Childs is only interested in the author's intention insofar as that information may provide a clue to the "inherent" and "objective" meaning of the canon itself.¹³ Biblical critics, having made the leap from author to text, are free to read the biblical text as modern critics read secular literature. The term "literary criticism," as employed by biblical critics has, by and large, become a generic term designating any number of critical methodologies borrowed from secular literary critics including both textual and reader oriented approaches.¹⁴

New Criticism and Structuralism, two textually oriented literary methods, are more concerned with the language and

¹³ Barton, *JSOT*, p.27.

¹⁴ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.168.

structure of the text than anything else and are both very systematic and objective in their approaches to biblical interpretation. Just as the name implies, structuralists are devoted to explaining how a text makes sense by analyzing the mechanisms or structures through which a text is meaningful.¹⁵ In his analysis of this method, Terence Keegan defines structuralism as it applies to biblical exegesis in terms of "recognizable atemporal and transcultural patterns of thought and experience that are basic to the human condition" and further maintains that "authors do not produce the meanings of their texts" but instead they "utilize, unconsciously, the deep structures that make communication possible."¹⁶ The goal then is to find the invariant structures in the text and from these structures describe the system of convictions that underlie the text.¹⁷ Structuralists regard the text under consideration as a work existing by itself, apart from author and reader, and having inherent meaning.

Similarly, the New Critics are concerned with what can be found in the text itself, using rigorous objective methods, rather than looking into the author's subjective intention in

¹⁵ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.40.

¹⁶ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.165 & 45.

¹⁷ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.70.

trying to determine the meaning of the text.¹⁸ In other words, they study the text as it stands unaffected by either the author or the reader.

In some sense then, Biblical interpretation has developed from historical criticism, an attempt to uncover the history behind the text and the intention of the author, to structuralism, which digs beneath the text to uncover narrative and mythical structures, and cultural codes, to new criticism which studies the text itself to uncover its inherent meaning. The significance shifted from the poles of "world" to "author" to "text." However, these methodologies neglected one vital aspect of interpretation -- the interpreter. Questions arose with regards to the interpreter that were not addressed by the aforementioned methodologies. These ground breaking questions begin to shape a new era in biblical interpretation, an era which takes the perspective of the interpreter into account and one that includes the response of the reader. At this point in the development of biblical interpretation (perhaps as a reaction to or revolt against the objectivity of Structuralism and New Criticism), reader-oriented or "reader-response" approaches burst onto the scene, thereby shifting the focus to Barton's final pole, that of the reader.

¹⁸ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.75.

4. Reader-Oriented Approaches

In Interpreting the Bible, Terence Keegan defines reader-response criticism as "a methodology which maintains that the meanings of the text are the production of the reader."¹⁹ Reader-response critics take the experience of reading as the explicit focus and examine the complex interaction between story and audience so that "meaning is not something one extracts from a text... meaning occurs not between the covers of a book or between the margins of a page but in the consciousness of the one who reads."²⁰ The act of reading is required before any meaning can be conveyed or transmitted; that is, the text has the potential to exist but only becomes an actuality when someone reads it.

Recall the "window" analogy of Murray Krieger mentioned earlier with regard to historical-critical methodologies. With regard to literary criticism, and reader-response criticism in particular, Krieger extends his analogy to that of a "mirror".²¹ Whereas the historical critics viewed the

¹⁹ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.170.

²⁰ Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p.15; Cf. Jane P. Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism" in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. xvi-xvii.

²¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp.3-4.

Bible as a window through which they could look to catch glimpses of the past, the reader-response critics compare the Bible to a mirror that reflects the images of the present world in which one lives. The historical critic looks for meaning behind the text, on the other side of the window. The reader-response critic insists that the meaning of the text is produced in the experience of reading and lies on this side of the text between reader and text.²²

An approach such as this can be described as "synchronic", with time, rather than "diachronic" through time.²³ A synchronic approach looks at the relevant meaning of a text from a particular point in time rather than the historical meaning. Synchronic approaches focus on the "narrative world" and how that world affects readers at a particular point in time; therefore, the text can vary in meaning dependent upon the interpreter's point in time. Meaning will vary from one century to the next, from one decade to the next, from one year to the next. It is possible for meaning to change with time. This is very different from the static diachronic approach to meaning, where there is one meaning which may or may not be beyond our grasp.

²² Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p.5.

²³ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, chap.3.

In this sense, synchronic approaches go beyond the limitations of previous methods and correct past mistakes. One might say that the past mistake was to view the information in the text as indicative of the real world of the author, which is something we have no way of knowing. Because the Bible is a literary work, the world of the text can only be construed to be the narrative world, the story world. To refer to it as the real world is a common mistake and is often referred to as the "referential fallacy".²⁴

This is not to say that one has to divorce historical questions completely from any sociological and political readings of the biblical text. David Rensberger, for example, grounds his study of John's Gospel and its relationship to Liberation Theology in the historical circumstance in which the text was written.²⁵ However, he does not take a literary approach to the text and, in taking a literary approach, one is essentially limiting the possible interpretations to the narrative itself rather than the historical circumstances surrounding that story; the historical accuracy of the story is, in reality, irrelevant.

In any case, the questions asked by these reader-response critics revolve around how the text affects the reader. To

²⁴ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.39.

²⁵ David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

ask how and why a text affects a reader is a very different question from what does a text mean or an author intend. Reader-response critics regard the quest for one single objective meaning as a waste of time, for it does not exist.²⁶ Due to the creativity of the reader, the text is open to a multiplicity of meanings, the possibilities are endless. Each reader interprets the text subjectively, and it is the "reader"'s pole of interpretation which will be the main focus of my study.

The Methodology of Reader-Response Criticism

Reader-response theory opens up a whole new world of interpretive methods in biblical studies. For instance, Wolfgang Iser developed a phenomenological approach in which the literary text, as a product of the writer's intentional act, partially controls the reader's response but also contains a number of "gaps" or "indeterminate elements" which must be filled in by the reader.²⁷ Because Iser's method still values the author's or text's intent, it limits what the reader can bring to the text, that is, the way the reader fills in the gaps, thereby allowing scholarship to dismiss some readings as misreadings. Cheryl Exum, on the other hand,

²⁶ Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.82.

²⁷ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p.150.

while employing Iserian "gap-filling" techniques in her feminist deconstructions of Old Testament narratives, does not feel bound by the intentions of the author and, as a result, arrives at profoundly rich and alternate subversions of the text.²⁸ Similarly, Mieke Bal combines narratology, psychoanalysis and feminist theory to "make a case for difference," for the importance of a multiplicity of readings, and to challenge the "dominant readings" of history.²⁹

Considered to be one of the more extreme approaches in reader-response theory, Stanley Fish's "affective stylistic" emphasizes the experience or act of reading the words on the page, how one word affects the reader's understanding and expectations, rather than the response that act elicits.³⁰

²⁸ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1993). Deconstructionist approaches such as this subvert the implicit claim of those previously mentioned structuralist approaches which state that the text possesses grounds on which to establish its own structure, unity and determinate meaning. For more on Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology see his works *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) and *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

²⁹ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp.1-8.

³⁰ Abrams, *Literary Terms*, pp.151-2; and Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

And yet even he recognizes the importance of multiplicity by acknowledging his method as merely one "strategy" among various others and consequently admitting there is no "right reading"; agreement in interpretation occurs only among readers in an "interpretive community" who happen to share a single strategy, only when readers view the world from the same perspective.³¹

So, although a text has a particular meaning contained in the words on the page, it requires a reader to interpret or translate those words into something meaningful to that person and to the circumstances in which that person exists. Interpretation, then, is greatly influenced by past experiences and present position of the reader. Preconceived notions, presuppositions and assumptions affect how we interpret each new experience including the experience of reading a text, each and every time. In Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, Ched Myers writes:

Claims that the meaning of a text is obvious, requiring no interpretation, or that someone interprets without bias, are no longer credible. Hermeneutics takes seriously the burden and responsibility of the interpreter as 'translator,' trying to bridge two vastly different worlds. Moreover, interpretation is a conversation between text and reader, requiring not

³¹ Abrams, *Literary Terms*, p.152. See also Fish's works "Interpreting the Variorum" and "Interpreting Interpreting the Variorum," *Critical Inquiry*, II, Spring, 1976, and II, Autumn, 1976.

detachment but involvement. This conversation is often called the hermeneutic circle.³²

Indeed, we must note at this point that some historical-critics such as Rudolph Bultman did acknowledge a similar dynamic even within their own efforts.³³ However, they did not embrace a total participation of the individual reader with the text. Instead, they attempted to set aside or suspend their opinions while entering into a dialogue with the text; they attempted to explore the ramifications of the text as if unaffected by their own positions. Reader-response critics, on the other hand, fully embraced the subjective nature of allowing one's position to influence one's understanding of a text.

In other words, life experiences influence those presuppositions brought by the reader to the text, thereby determining how a reader fills in the gaps and what relevant meaning the reader finds within it. This dialogue between text and reader introduces the importance of the perspective

³² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.5.

³³ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.45; Ashton speaks of Bultman in terms of exemplifying the 'hermeneutical circle.' See also Hawkin, *Christ and Modernity*, pp.20-30 in which Bultmann's attempt to translate Jesus' message into existential terms meaningful to the modern world is explained.

-- the historical context, commitments and biases -- of the reader, what Myers refers to as the "reading site."³⁴

Importance of the Reading Site

Although they did not coin the phrase, Liberation Theologians understand the importance of the "reading site." Liberation Theology emerged when classically western trained Catholic theologians sent to Latin America were presented with a situation of social injustice in which traditional readings of the text held little appeal for the millions of people trying to survive the injustice and poverty that enveloped them.³⁵ Soon after, out of this third world context, liberationist readings of the text emerged based on a reading site grounded in a long history of poverty, oppression and degradation.³⁶

³⁴ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, chapter 1, pp.6ff.

³⁵ Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.38, in reference to statements made by the Brazilian liberation theologian Carlos Mesters.

³⁶ Note, however, that not all liberation theologians are Latin American, nor are they all Catholic. Liberation theology is at work in Asia, Africa, and in North America within women's movements, racial movements, ethnic movements, labour movements, human rights movements, environmentalist movements, etc. Liberation theology is being applied within many different contexts, some of which I will discuss in my third chapter, but until then my focus will remain on the Latin American context.

In his book Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible, Carlos Mesters employs the term "locus" when referring to the place from which people read and interpret the Biblical text. The "locus" is composed of the PRE-TEXT, the situation or current reality of the interpreter, and the CONTEXT, the act of living the faith in one's community.³⁷ Mesters goes on to say that the locus, for those liberationist readers, has the following features:

- (1) It is a situation of "captivity."
- (2) It is a journey and a struggle in search of liberation.
- (3) Life and faith are combined in unity.
- (4) Faith is at the service of a life being liberated.
- (5) The Bible is read to nourish this faith which is service.³⁸

So essentially what Mesters refers to as the "locus" parallels our conception of a "reading site."

Mesters attempts to explain this more fully by stressing the significance of the three factors -- the pretext of life, the context of the community's faith, and the text of the Bible (by this he means the scientific exegesis of the text) - - by likening it to a triangle in the following diagram.³⁹

³⁷ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), pp.13-15.

³⁸ Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, p.15.

³⁹ Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, p.108.

Diagram Three

Mesters is of the opinion that in the past the problem was that one element, the text or scientific exegesis, was given too much emphasis. There must be equal importance placed on each element, on each corner of the triangle. To quote Mesters:

If one of these elements is missing, our interpretation is defective, or at least incomplete. In other words, the text has to be read and interpreted in the light of the pretext of life and within the context of the community's faith. It is like a violin. The text is the strings, the context is the sound-box, and the pre-text is the reason for playing and the audience which asks for a cheerful tune. Without the audience, without a reason for playing, without the sound-box, all that is left are strings, which on their own will not produce music.⁴⁰

Interpreting the Bible, then, depends on the integration of all three of these forces. Therefore, although the liberation theologians have affixed different labels on it, they

⁴⁰ Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, p.109.

nevertheless do indeed acknowledge the importance of the reading site.

Carlos Mesters has further explained the method of Liberation Theology as threefold, consisting of seeing, judging and acting.⁴¹ It starts with the act of "seeing" how one's experiences have affected one's attitudes, that is, by recognizing your own "reading site"; this recognition of viewpoint allows for an interpretation of the text that unites subjectivity and objectivity. Then, it seeks to understand the reasons for that kind of existence and relate them to the stories of deliverance from oppressive circumstances in the Bible.⁴² This is in fact a judgement of the social circumstance in which one lives, in this case the judgement has been of an unjust society. And then from the judgement of value, there is a move to action (a very Lonerganian concept).⁴³ Liberation theology calls one to act, to liberate or free the people from oppression. As in any society there

⁴¹ Carlos Mesters, "Como se faz Teologia hoje no Brasil?" *Estudos Biblicos I* (1985), pp.1ff. and Mesters' "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People," *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities: Papers from the International Ecumenical Congress of Theology 1980*, eds. S. Torres and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), pp.197-210. For a summary of these ideas see Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.38.

⁴² Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.38.

⁴³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, in which he lists and explains his levels of development, the key to which is acting, this is true authenticity.

exists a variety of opinions on exactly what means should be employed in order to bring about this liberation.

My Method and Reading Site

The methodology that I will employ in my reading of Mark's Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mk. 6:30-44) is one of reader-response criticism in which I acknowledge my own reading site, address key concerns arising from it, and interpret the text based on that reading site. Like those feminists mentioned above, I do not feel bound by the intentions of the author (even if it were possible to ever really know such intentions); my reading is not intentionalist. Like Stanley Fish, I regard my reading strategy as merely one among many and not necessarily the only reading but perhaps a richer and more creative reading than some others. If we assume that the text exists so that the reader may uncover some meaning relevant to her/his life, then it follows that agreement in interpretation only occurs among readers who share the same perspective or bring similar experiences to the text.

What, then, do I bring to the text, what is my "reading site"? Similar to many liberation theologians, I bring to the text a belief in the equality of all people and in the existence of fundamental human rights, an understanding that the teachings of Christ have been misrepresented by numerous

institutions in order to protect their own interests and power base in society, an interest in social justice movements particularly those which serve to liberate peoples from oppressive situations no matter what that might be, and a commitment to revealing a basis for human rights within the New Testament.

I both recognize and appreciate the fact that living in the Western world, I am living in privileged conditions which allow me the opportunity to contemplate these issues, to voice my opinions freely, and to write about them. In Latin America, for the majority of people the situation is very different, it is one of poverty, the product of a long history of colonialism, repressive local governments allied with the rich, and continued dependence upon an international economy controlled by industrial nations of the Western world.⁴⁴ The human rights violations that are inherent in the social

⁴⁴ Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures, 1989-1991. Volume 1.* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), pp.76-77. Cf., James D. Cockcroft, Andre Gunder Frank and Dale L. Johnson, *Dependence and Underdevelopment: Latin America's Political Economy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972); Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, trans. Marjory Mattingly Urquidí (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Roberto Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation" in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J., eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp.4-6; and Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, Robert R. Barr, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), and *A Theology of Liberation*, Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

structures of Latin America (the economic, political, social and religious institutions) have provided a reading site from which to respond to the New Testament and to traditional Christian practices, and that reading site is based on the personal experience of injustice. Because I have not experienced or witnessed the magnitude of these problems first hand, I cannot say that my reading site is consistent with that of those liberation theologians who deal with these crisis on a daily basis. But I can attest to a sympathetic viewpoint and a similar belief system to that which drives their cause. I have what Ched Myers refers to as "an affinity of site."⁴⁵

Myers also employs the phrase "affinity of site" or "affinity with the text" to describe the identification of the poor and oppressed in Latin America with the poor and oppressed people in the Biblical text, in particular with those people of Mark's Gospel. Mark's primary audience was also poor and exploited and for this reason many people view Mark in a political light. Just as the masses of Latin America feel closer to the world of Mark's Gospel because of the parallels of their circumstance with that of the text, I feel closer to liberation theologians because of a similar belief system, the belief in the equality of all people.

⁴⁵ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.7.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the development of biblical interpretation from the period of precritical readings to the more prevalent forms to date, located the methodology of reader-response criticism within this framework, stressed the importance of the reading site as influential in the interpretive process and proceeded to acknowledge my own reading site. Let us remember that criticism of any kind is merely an attempt to explain. No one method can answer all questions and each has its limitations. The question and method must co-relate in order for any progress to be made at all. Keeping this in mind, my question would make no sense if I were to employ an historical-critical method but, within the context of the reader-response methodology, my question makes perfect sense. My question and method correspond, they co-relate.

Having established this methodology of reader-response criticism within an academic context, the question I propose is this: When we read Mark's account of the "Feeding of the Five Thousand" (Mk. 6:30-44) from the reading site of the poor and the marginalized, what do we see? What is the emphasis of the story? Does it make any statements on the structure of society as a whole? In what ways might those statements hold relevant meaning for various social groups today? These are

the questions that I will attempt to answer in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

A Liberationist Rereading of Mark 6:30-44 "The Feeding of the Five Thousand"

Introduction

The episode in Mark 6:30-44, commonly known as the "Feeding of the Five Thousand," has multiple levels of interpretation and meaning. Perhaps it is most useful to start, as Ched Myers did in Binding the Strong Man, with a discussion of contemporary hermeneutics and its preoccupation with "suspicion."⁴⁶ Myers writes that for historical critics this suspicion has revolved around "the task of creating critical distance between the text and interpreter" and that readers attempt to suspend their own assumptions and biases in order to attain an "objective" assessment of the text.⁴⁷ However, according to Myers, claims that it is possible to fully suspend assumptions and interpret without bias are no longer credible. His explanation of the hermeneutic circle reads as follows:

Interpretation is a conversation between text and reader, requiring not detachment but involvement. This conversation is often called the 'hermeneutic circle.' Our life situation will necessarily determine the questions we bring to the text, and hence strongly influence what it says and means to us. At the same time,

⁴⁶ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, pp.3-6.

⁴⁷ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.4.

the text maintains its own integrity, and we owe it to ourselves and the text to try to enter into its world as much as possible. Then, if we are genuinely listening to the text, we will allow it to influence how we understand and what we do about our situation (it 'interprets' us). Until the circle from context to text back to context is completed, we cannot be said to have fully interpreted the text.⁴⁸

Liberation theology attempts to fully interpret the text in just such a manner, from context to text back to context. Juan Luis Segundo traces this hermeneutic circle within liberation theology from its experience of "committed Christian practice" and critical awareness of dominant ideologies and social structures that shape our world, to a suspicion of prevailing methods of biblical exegesis which raise "profound and enriching questions," to the resultant fresh interpretations of the Bible that emerge and the application of those interpretations in a social context.⁴⁹

Unlike some historical-critical methods, liberation theology is more suspicious of First World theology than the text and attempts to focus on the text itself rather than go "behind" the text to the society from which it was produced.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.5.

⁴⁹ Juan Luis Segundo, "The Hermeneutic Circle," in *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey*, Deane Ferm, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), p.66 and *Liberation of Theology*, Chapter 1.

⁵⁰ Recall the "window" and "mirror" analogies previously discussed in chapter one. Also, for further discussion of how some historical critics regard this "hermeneutic of suspicion" see Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, pp.131-133.

More specifically, a theology of liberation questions the use made of certain doctrines and asks in whose interests have they been utilized: for the ruling class or the poor?⁵¹ They challenge the dominance of the theological agenda set by First World theology when the pressing concerns of the poor in the Third World demand very different priorities.⁵²

One of the most important teachings one can extract from liberation theology is its refusal to accept that the dominant political powers are the ultimate point of reference for the world. Present arrangements are relativized when the ultimate reference point of the world is divine, when it is an other worldly power. The hope for a better world, for a Messianic Kingdom on earth, was a dominant eschatological belief within the first century.⁵³ This idea has been revitalized and is very much a part of liberation theology's eschatology. Such a hope gives positive significance to action for social change and gives it a basis in the biblical text and early Christian community itself.

So, in this chapter, I will use my nominal understanding of Mark 6:30-44 to explore the meaning the text offers to me as a reader regarding problems of social injustice. In other

⁵¹ Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.132.

⁵² Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.132.

⁵³ Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.135.

words, I will focus on the perceived meaning of this narrative for those who suffer through the experience of social injustice on a daily basis. I will move from context to text back to context and, in doing so, I will align myself in terms of motive and methodology with the liberationist's hermeneutic circle. I will do this by first clarifying my reasons for selecting the Gospel of Mark and this feeding narrative in particular as demonstrative of Jesus' insights regarding matters of justice. Second, I will offer my own interpretation, which places the most significant emphasis on the notion of giving, the extension of the circle to include all people, and the effect this has on the poor. From this I deliberate upon the subversiveness of Jesus' actions within the narrative world and the emerging implicit criticisms of societal forms of institutionalized injustice and systemic inequality. Finally, I will show how such a rereading of this feeding narrative influences the readings of other Marcan narratives and compares to other interpretations. But first, why have I chosen Mark's narrative?

Why Mark's Narrative?

In the previous chapter, Ched Myers' term "affinity of site" was introduced to explain the kinship felt by the poor and oppressed of Latin America towards the poor and oppressed people in the Biblical text, in particular with those people

in Mark's Gospel.⁵⁴ It was presumed that the masses of Latin America feel closer to the world of Mark's Gospel because of the perceived parallels between their circumstance and that of the text. Mark's primary audience was also exploited and for this reason many people view Mark in a distinctly political light.

It is precisely because of this that I have chosen a text of Mark as the subject of my analysis. I feel that the Marcan text addresses the issues of systemic inequality by providing insight into an alternative system, one that emphasizes sharing and giving rather than buying and selling. This emphasis of the Gospel of Mark is significant because it speaks to all people who feel exploited, marginalized, and/or oppressed.

Why choose a feeding narrative? What does this episode demonstrate to the reader that another would not illustrate just as well? Why not employ a more concrete rejection of the monetary system such as Mark 12:13-17? In response to the question of paying taxes to Caesar in Mark 12:15, Jesus commands his disciples to "φέρετέ μοι δηνάριον ἵνα ἴδω" (Bring to me a denarius so that I may see it). Here the reader is alerted to the fact that Jesus does not have any denarius in his possession nor does he even touch the coin

⁵⁴ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.7.

once it has been brought before him. The coin and all that it represents, the Roman authority and their monetary system inclusive, are never connected to Jesus, effectively illustrating his rejection of both.⁵⁵ In verse 17, when Jesus declares that people should "Τὰ Καίσαρος ἀπόδοτε Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ τῷ Θεῷ" (Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and to God the things that belong to God), the narrative takes on more overt political connotations, especially when applied to land ownership issues.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ For further discussion of this interpretation of the Mark 12 see Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p.312.

⁵⁶ The Jewish community in the time of Mark's Gospel would have believed the land to belong to God not Rome and as such, Jesus' words could be read as an advocacy of the expulsion of the Romans from the Holy Land, for it did not belong to Caesar, and furthermore, his actions could be interpreted as revolutionist. S.G.F. Brandon first popularized the thesis that the historical Jesus was actually a political revolutionary allied with the Zealot movement in his text *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967). Martin Hengel takes a close look at those theories that align Jesus with the Zealot movement and revolutionist cause locating Robert Eisler, S.G.F. Brandon, and Joel Carmichael among those historical critics who regard Jesus in this light in his work *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?*, trans. William Klassen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). Note, however, that Hengel concludes that Jesus is not a revolutionary but a passivist in that he advocates a non-violent approach to change. See also Richard Horsley's *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987) in which he supports the notion of Jesus as passivist and claims that although Jesus was actively engaged in resisting structural violence, he did not advocate reactive violence.

In their readings, liberationists perceive the division between the *emperor's things* and *God's things* to be illusory, not in accordance with God's will, and therefore by no means representative of the way the world should be. Liberationists recognize an imposition of the powerful upon the weak, an imposition which should not be accepted by those who really want to live a life in accordance with the will of God.⁵⁷ As a result, liberationist exegesis of Mark 12:13-17 tends to focus on the negation of an economic system based on greed. And so, although the coin narrative may provide a concrete example of Jesus' renunciation of one particular monetary system, that of the Romans, the feeding narratives lay the foundation upon which this narrative is based.

The feeding narratives establish the groundwork in setting forth a system based on giving, based on sharing what one has with those who have not. The feeding of the multitudes is relayed twice in each of the Gospels of Mark (6:30-44 and 8:1-9) and of Matthew (14:13-23 and 15:32-39), once in the Gospel of Luke (9:10-17), and once in John's Gospel (6:1-14). Obviously there is an important message

⁵⁷ Laureano, *The Gospel of Solentiname*, ed. Ernesto Cardenal (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977-84), vol.3, p.284. Laureano understands Mark 12 as a reflection of the situation in Nicaragua before the revolution of 1979. For similar ideas see also Michel Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches to the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp.78f and Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, p.18.

within the narrative, otherwise it would not occur as often. Having relied upon the Marcan accounts as a primary source, both Matthew and Luke alternately amplify and reduce the stories as presented in Mark. John, on the other hand, has a distinct purpose for its use other than simply retelling the story; John's intent is to interpret the events and provide his own commentary in order to emphasize the divine nature of Jesus. His interpretation of the event is, however, irrelevant for my purposes, as I have chosen to focus entirely on the Marcan account. The Gospel of Mark is concerned mostly with the actions and influences of Jesus and as a result his account is more direct, more straightforward and most appropriate for my exegesis.

Generally believed to be the first written gospel, Mark chronicles the ministry of Jesus, a man who wrote nothing but spoke with an unofficial but perceived divine authority, and although it is a written text, it was meant to be read aloud to a circle of listeners.⁵⁸ Just as Jesus relayed his message to his followers orally, the structure of Mark's Gospel employs a storytelling technique and follows a similar pattern. So too is liberation theology largely spoken and, in this sense, many parallels can be drawn between the Marcan

⁵⁸ John Drury, "Mark" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), p.404.

text and the liberationist method. Jesus questions and instructs followers by word of mouth in this Gospel; similarly, liberation theology is a spoken practice originating from the thoughts and words of followers which are compiled and recorded at a later date. Because Mark reveals Jesus' method in this manner, it is not surprising that this text speaks to the masses of Latin America in such a profound way. Also, the emphasis on action, on what Jesus did -- his practice -- is in all likelihood the rationale behind the call for action and social change within the liberationist movement. In this regard, they make good use of the text.

Although the version in Mark 8 is typically regarded as the more universal of the two feeding narratives in this Gospel, I have chosen to go against the norm and present a case for the universal appeal of Mark 6. It is true that I could have chosen to analyze the affect of the consecutive narratives on the reader, but I have decided against this; the problems of duality and of the rhetoric of irony are not issues I purport to address in this thesis.⁵⁹ Instead I have

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the rhetoric of irony and the function of dramatic irony in Mark, see Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1981), pp.91-99 and *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 11-14 and 167-75. Here Fowler provides an explanation of the function of the repetition and lack of understanding by the disciples presented again in the second episode and the affect this has on the reader.

decided upon one specific account, that of Mark 6:30-44.

I have chosen the episode of Mark 6 rather than that of Mark 8 for many reasons: it is the first account of the event, it is the longest and most descriptive of the feeding narratives, and it is here that Jesus rejects the structures of buying and selling goods *for the first time*. He resists the inherent inequality of that system and chooses a more just system -- the system of the gift. The food is not yours, it is not mine, it is ours. He insists upon the people's rights to basic necessities such as food. Mark 8, then, acts as a short reminder later in the text to further emphasize the initial lesson. Mark 6 presents the lesson, Mark 8 reminds the reader. For these reasons I have chosen to employ this account as the focus of my thesis. Let us turn now to the passage itself.

The Passage of Mark 6:30-44

Mark 6:30-44 details an incident in which Jesus, presented with a multitude of hungry people, does a "miraculous" thing in multiplying the loaves and fishes, feeding the crowd and satisfying their basic needs. In the New Revised Standard Version the passage reads as follows:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even

to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mk. 6.30-44)

The narrative begins with the disciples, exhausted from their mission, returning to Jesus to tell him of their experiences. Jesus recognizing their need for food and rest suggests they travel by boat to "ἐρημον τόπον," a deserted spot or a deserted place on the opposite side of the lake. A crowd of curious people see them set sail and, discerning their destination, decide to set out on foot to meet them on the other side. When the boat arrives, Jesus is greeted by a "πολὸν ὄχλον" or "great crowd" for whom he has much compassion. So, Mark tells us "ἤρξατο διδάσκειν αὐτοὺς πολλὰ," that "he began to teach them many things" (v.34).

What exactly does he teach them? Mark does not say, or does he? The story continues with a discussion that Jesus has with his disciples. Perhaps the discussion is the most significant part of the narrative, perhaps this is the teaching. The text informs the reader that the disciples, realizing that it is late, approach Jesus and suggest he send the many people away to buy food for themselves. Nowhere is it stated that Jesus has finished teaching yet. He teaches both through dialogue and example.

Ignoring their suggestion, Jesus directs the disciples to "Δότε αὐτοῖς ὑμεῖς φαγεῖν," to give them something to eat (v.37). The disciples understand the directive to mean that they, the disciples, are to go purchase enough food for the people and then distribute it. Exhibiting their lack of comprehension, they propose this option to Jesus; he ignores this recommendation as well and inquires as to what provisions, specifically how many loaves, they have among them already, to which they respond five and two fish (v.38).

Commanding the crowd to sit down in groups, Jesus blesses and breaks the loaves and asks the disciples to distribute the food, to give it to the crowd. He does the same with the fish. All five thousand people eat and are satisfied. One of their most basic needs, the need for food, has been filled. The disciples then gather twelve baskets of leftover food.

What is the teaching here? What message might the crowd receive within this narrative world? What might Mark's audience perceive to be the teaching here? What meaning might the story carry for contemporary readers? And most important for my interpretation of the story, what might this story reveal to readers coming from a perspective of social injustice?

Within the narrative world of Mark 6, none of the characters, neither the disciples as participants in his mission nor the crowd as recipients of his divine gift of food, seem to grasp the meaning of Jesus' miraculous actions. Though the characters do not recognize the miracle, both Mark's intended audience and the contemporary reader are presented with the opportunity to acknowledge and to witness the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the text offers yet even deeper levels of meaning to its readers beyond functioning as witnesses.

On one level, one might recognize the import of Jesus' act of providing food for those who have none and the example of generosity that he sets forth. On another level, one might be impressed by the provision of spiritual nourishment for those who are without hope and faith. All people are equal at God's table and are therefore entitled to basic sustenance,

⁶⁰ George Aichele, et al., *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp.23-24.

whether that be physical or spiritual. In addition, readers of the text might find themselves identifying with the disciples who do not fully understand the intentions of Jesus and demonstrate this by misinterpreting his directives continuously throughout the narrative.⁶¹

Proponents of the faith, such as Augustine, would have the reader believe that the miraculous multiplication of the food is evidence that indeed Jesus is the Son of God; however, this is not a point I wish to take up. My concern here is with the possible relevance this story could have in teaching anyone with a reading site based in a circumstance of injustice the importance of treating each other in an equalitative and fair manner.

At this point, my analysis turns directly to my initial question: When we read Mark's account of the "Feeding of the Five Thousand" from the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized, what do we see? As stated in the previous chapter, the importance of the reading site in the act of interpretation becomes evident as I apply the methodology of

⁶¹ The disciples demonstrate their miscomprehension even moreso in Mark 8. The disciples are supposed to have witnessed a similar event in Mark 6 and yet just a short time later they do not anticipate Jesus' actions nor even remember the event. The reader of the text does however both anticipate and remember and is left with a feeling of confusion about the text. Fowler attributes this to the author's use of irony. For more explanation on the rhetoric of irony and the function of dramatic irony in Mark see Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes*, pp.91-99 and *Let the Reader Understand*, pp.11-14 and 167-75.

reader-response criticism to this particular narrative. The interpretation to follow, then, is merely one conceivable liberationist reading of the narrative. Moreover, my liberationist rereading recognizes not only an emphasis on giving, but also an implicit critique of systemic injustice as most important to readers situated in oppressive and unjust circumstances.

Emphasis on Giving

It is my contention that a fuller understanding of the narrative can be achieved if one considers the emphasis on giving and sharing rather than on purchasing goods. The language of the disciples includes *buying* (ἀγοράσσειν, v.37), Jesus' diction stresses *giving*. Jesus makes the directive to "give" on two occasions: 1) in verse 37 Jesus directs the disciples, "Δότε αὐτοῖς ὑμεῖς φαγεῖν," a direct translation being "You give them something to eat," and 2) in verse 41 the directive is implied when he gave the loaves to his disciples to set in front of the people, "ἐδίδον τοῖς μαθηταῖς [αὐτοῦ] ἵνα παρατιθῶσιν αὐτοῖς." Various forms of the verb appear three times throughout this passage. In favoring giving and sharing, Jesus' actions represent a rejection of the monetary system in general. Instead he embraces the system of the gift, extends his table to all people, and considers how this affects the poor.

1. System of the Gift

With regard to Mark 6.30-44, an opposition exists between Jesus and the disciples. The disciples speak of money when they disclose to Jesus that they have "δηνάρῳ διακοσίῳ," two hundred denarii (v.37). But never does Jesus mention money, he disassociates himself from it. The word choice of the disciples demonstrates their recognition of the economic order imposed by society -- the circulation of money. In contrast, Jesus recognizes a different order substantiated by need, a social order in which the basic needs of all people are filled, no one is left hungry, and all people are fed. Consequently, Jesus is presented as one who emphasizes egalitarianism by distancing himself from money throughout the gospel.⁶²

What Jesus is in fact doing here is advocating the Deuteronomic Code and promoting its "system of the gift."⁶³ The text of Deuteronomy 12-26 regulates human relations and sets out standards by which people should treat each other. The possibility of living in peace can only be realized when people institute reciprocal giving in all aspects of social living and that includes family relationships, distribution of

⁶² Not only does Mark do this here, but also in chapter 12.

⁶³ Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches*, pp.32-33.

food, etc.⁶⁴ From this one can infer that 'to love' is 'to give'.

Jesus is therefore presented as one who challenges and subverts the prevailing societal norms. John Drury classifies Mark as folktale and has this to say about the text and Mark's portrayal of Jesus:

Before its official canonization as holy Scripture, it [Mark] first lived among unofficial people and delighted them by having nothing good to say about officialdom -- high priest, procurator, or even apostle... Mark's Jesus is typically a folktale hero, a wanderer going through ordeals which commandeer, disrupt, and reorder the established myths.⁶⁵

Although we need not agree with his classification of Mark as folktale, we can still acknowledge Drury's point concerning the subversive practice of Jesus for not only does he challenge the disciples to feed the crowd in verse 37, he also subverts the ideological norms by implicitly denouncing the merchant exchange system and opting to provide the people with what they needed by sharing what was available. So, whereas the disciples align themselves with the societal system of exchange, Jesus clearly aligns himself with God's system of giving people in need what belongs to them.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches*, pp.32-33.

⁶⁵ Drury, "Mark," p.402.

⁶⁶ Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches*, p.81.

A similar reading of this narrative is illuminated by the materialist approaches of liberation theologians such as Fernando Belo and Michel Clevenot. By employing the phrase "materialist" one simply means that the material conditions in which people live ultimately produce consciousness, and the type of work a person does and the social class to which one belongs are particularly influential. Clevenot explains the materialist approach with the presuppositions:

- (a) that we take as our point of departure the present struggles in which we are involved, so that we can re-read the texts that have woven our history and free them from those who have used them to legitimize their own power;
- (b) that we take seriously the 'materiality' of the text, which can be seen as the product of practice of language situated in class struggles and within the dominant ideology of a given social structure.⁶⁷

Belo's Marxist literary-critical analysis depicts Jesus as one who subverts the prevailing ideological consensus and distances himself from money most notably in this feeding narrative through the conversation with his disciples.⁶⁸ With regard to Jesus' negation of the merchant system, Belo states, "He [Jesus] thus rejects the seizure of products by the monetary system so as to attach an *exchange value* to them, and makes the *use value* of the loaves and fishes the controlling

⁶⁷ Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches*, p.xi.

⁶⁸ Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), see esp. "The Practice of the Hands or Charity" on pp.244-245.

factor."⁶⁹ In other words, rather than attach an exchange value to commodities, Jesus values their use and in doing so, sets an example for others to do the same.

Michel Clevenot's analysis of the situation further clarifies this point when he writes:

Exchange value defines the aptitude of an object for being exchanged for other objects and transforms all products of human work as well as the workers themselves into saleable commodities. To replace 'buy bread with money' with 'give what you have' is to subvert the fetishism of merchandise that transforms social relationships into buying and selling of things. (Marx also calls this process 'reification' or thingifying.) It is at the same time the restoration of the use value, the utility belonging to each thing, and the sharing of this use with everyone.⁷⁰

Clevenot also offers this version of Belo's interpretation:

... the disciples suggest sending the people 'to buy themselves something to eat' (6.36) and speak of 'two hundred denarii' (6.37). Jesus replies: 'How many loaves have you?' (6.38) 'Give them something to eat' (6.37). The bread is distributed; the crowd is filled. The movement indicated by the text is clear; it is the opposition of buying with money to giving what they have. What the text exalts is not the multiplying of the loaves but rather the negation of the merchant system that governs exchange by money and the promotion of the system of the gift in which everything belongs to everyone. In a social organization dominated by those who have in their hands the economic, political, and ideological apparatus, we can have bread only for money. To affirm that we must share wealth is obviously to introduce a subversion of the system of classes. It is not surprising that the rich find that message saddening (10.1-22).⁷¹

⁶⁹ Belo, *A Materialist Reading*, p.244.

⁷⁰ Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches*, p.81.

⁷¹ Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches*, p.78.

Even George Pixley, in his historical reconstructions of the society in which the Marcan text was composed, concentrates on themes of class struggle, Jesus' challenge to the economic base and his egalitarian message.⁷² Although Pixley is not concerned with the meaning this holds for present-day readers, his exegesis of Mark's Gospel remains relevant to the liberationist cause if one chooses to draw parallels between the historical circumstance of the first century with that of the social, economic and political circumstance in Latin American at the present time.

To return to Belo's analysis of this passage for a moment, he uses the phrase "ecclesial economy" to refer to an economic system in which people share whatever they have as a means of life, "according to what each one needed".⁷³ The movement within the narrative is one that leans towards this economic practice. Jesus utilizes the resources available to him and distributes them amongst the crowd. The movement of Jesus' practice is now extended to include not only his disciples but also to include the crowd.

⁷² George Pixley, *God's Kingdom: A Guide for Biblical Study* (London: SCM Press, 1981), pp.72-82.

⁷³ Belo, *A Materialist Reading*, p.244. See also Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-37.

2. Extension of the 'Table'

In Mark's narrative, the crowd sits on the grass "συμπόσια συμπόσια," in parties (v.39), and "πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ," in groups (v.40), and waits to be fed. The depiction of the crowd, having been arranged for a meal, conjures up the image of being seated at a table. The fact that Jesus then blesses, breaks and distributes the loaves amongst these people reminds the reader of the Last Supper. This episode has sometimes been viewed as the first Eucharist of the Christian church because it was the first recorded participation in a sacred meal by an assembled body of Jesus' followers.⁷⁴

In any case, Belo regards this movement on an economic level as indicative of "the extension to the whole world of this circle as a table at which the poor are filled, a pooling and sharing of all one has."⁷⁵ At the very least, Jesus' "table" has been extended here to include not only his most obedient followers, represented by his disciples, but to include all people, as seen in the crowds before him.

If the reader follows the topographical movement of the narrative, the same conclusion might be reached. The beginning of the narrative informs the reader that the disciples have just returned from a missionary journey. The

⁷⁴ David Bruce Taylor, *Mark's Gospel as Literature and History* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p.172.

⁷⁵ Belo, *A Materialist Reading*, p.245.

disciples are travelling further and further away to deliver the Messianic message to more and more people. The repetition of the "coming and going" images within the first three verses only reinforces the travelling motif of this narrative. First the disciples return from a journey, then accompanied by Jesus they set out by boat on another journey, and finally the reader is told that many people follow, making the journey themselves on foot. For Belo, when Jesus and the disciples set out on boat to cross the waters, they are indeed marking the beginning of the circulation of Jesus' mission and his egalitarian message outside of Galilee.⁷⁶ In looking at the larger picture, the reader sees the symbolic extension of the table through the geographical extension of the message to include more cities, more places, and more people. Both Jesus' presence and teaching is made available to a worldwide table.

Belo writes that perhaps this expansion of the circle explains why Jesus places the utmost importance upon the second commandment from Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," where "neighbour" is intended to be all inclusive.⁷⁷ Both the mission and message are extended to Gentile as well as Jew. The narrative's explicit use of forms

⁷⁶ Belo, *A Materialist Reading*, p.139.

⁷⁷ Belo, *A Materialist Reading*, p.245.

of "πάντα," all or every, indicates the extreme importance of this point. The word is used five times in total within this feeding narrative, three of which are in direct reference to people. The "Golden Rule," as it is often referred to, surely was meant to include all people, and that includes the poor, the marginalized, the exploited, and the oppressed.

3. Effect on the Poor

At this time, let us look at some definitions of "the poor." In The Power of the Poor in History, Gustavo Gutierrez defines "the poor of the world" as "the exploited classes, despised ethnic groups and marginalized cultures" and further cites laborers, peasants, elderly, youth, unemployed, women, and those from oppressed ethnic and racial groups among others included in this category.⁷⁸ He observes that "the poor" have in effect become "nonpersons" - "suffering misery and exploitation, deprived of the most elemental human rights, scarcely aware that they are human beings at all."⁷⁹ Karen Lebacqz comments that the poor as defined by Gutierrez "applies not only to those who are materially deprived but also to those who are 'marginated' in society, lacking full access to and participation in socioeconomic and political

⁷⁸ Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor*, pp.37, 137, & 193.

⁷⁹ Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor*, p.50.

processes."⁸⁰ No matter whose definition one employs, most academics will agree that the poor are characterized by oppression, repression, and dependence.⁸¹ They are victims of the economic, political, and social systems, they are victims of institutionalized injustice.

The Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate at Puebla in 1979 named a range of victims of institutionalized injustice including young children whose chances for development are hindered, ill-paid laborers kept from organizing, old people disregarded because they are viewed as unproductive, among others.⁸² Gutierrez also cites Puebla's attack on the appropriation of wealth by a privileged minority as grounds for a denunciation of the capitalist system in general and of the presence of multinational

⁸⁰ Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p.101. See also Enrique Dussell in *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), pp.36-37; he offers three categories of the poor: the oppressed, the servants or prophets, and those outside the system. It is this third category of "those outside the system" that Lebacqz refers to as marginalized because they are forced to live on the margins of society.

⁸¹ LeBacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, p.101.

⁸² "Puebla Final Document," the full official text of the conference at Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, January 27 - February 13, 1979, can be found in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, eds. John Eagleson and Philip Sharper, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978). A list of victims of institutionalized injustice is provided in Sections 31-40 of the final document.

corporations specifically.⁸³ In naming the poor as victims of such systemic injustice, are we, as members of those systems, not in part responsible for the situation in which they find themselves? And, if so, how can we make a difference?

Implicit Critique of Systemic Injustice

If we take a closer look at the situation of Latin America, we must question how and why it has fallen prey to economic poverty, political repression and social injustice. Colonialization has often been credited as the instigator of such problems, but even if this is true, why does the situation persist? It is most conceivable that former colonialization has simply been replaced by new forms of oppression. In contemporary society centers of power are largely economic. To quote Karen LeBacqz:

Internationalization of capital and proliferation of multinational corporations has resulted in a situation in which Third World countries have relatively little power or autonomy in the bargaining process: if they refuse to provide the desired cheap labor, corporations simply go elsewhere. Military regimes and 'national security states' have arisen to ensure compliance of the masses with this economic agenda.⁸⁴

Over the years, the countries of Latin America, like almost every other country in the world today, have become dependent upon outside systems and unlike the dominant capitalist First

⁸³ Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor*, p.133.

⁸⁴ LeBacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, pp.101-102.

World countries who have both money and power, Latin America and other Third World regions have very little of either. Third World countries hold relatively no power or autonomy in the bargaining processes of a global market economy. And as a result of this internationally dominant capitalist system, the gap between the upper and lower classes and between the rich and the poor just continues to grow. And so we have the dichotomies of oppressor and oppressed, privileged and deprived, upper and lower classes, rich and poor, and the list goes on.

1. Marxist Analysis of Social Structures

Many liberation theologians turn to Marxist analysis of dependency and class conflict in an attempt to comprehend what is really involved in these oppositions and this is why so many materialist approaches emerge within the discipline.⁸⁵ Karl Marx recognized that political attitudes are rooted in economic conditions and believed that socio-economic relations are the primary determining factors in history. He observed that the theories accepted in any particular society express the interests of the ruling class and as soon as one class

⁸⁵ For an in depth discussion of the Latin American sociological and economic Marxism of dependency see Enrique D. Dussell's "Theology of Liberation and Marxism," tran. by Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis*, pp.85-102, see esp. 88-9 & 96.

acquires control over material production, it begins to impose ideas on society that best serve its purposes in order to remain dominant and to retain control. As a result, the rift between the upper class property owners, the bourgeoisie, and the lower working class of laborers, the proletariat, widens. Marx claimed that the proletariat will increase in number, in suffering, and in frustration until it feels the necessity to revolt against the system as a matter of survival. Marxism demands social structural change in the form of the elimination of the capitalist system in favor of a more socialist structure.⁸⁶

Like Marx, Gutierrez believes that the lack of equitable distribution of goods is not simply an "unfortunate" circumstance that will be overcome in time, rather it is "the fault of the system itself".⁸⁷ He goes on to say that the misery and exploitation of the poor are due "not to neglect but to the very logic of the system" and that capitalism is "of its very nature" detrimental to the poor.⁸⁸ As a result, Gutierrez calls into question the capitalist system as a whole.

⁸⁶ For more details on the society Marx envisioned, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848), *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), esp. pp.93-95.

⁸⁷ Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor*, p.117.

⁸⁸ Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor*, pp.117 & 85.

Similarly, Jose Porfirio Miranda perceives capitalism as a system to be the "core locus" of injustice and even refers to capitalist systems within the context of "sin" as a "structural phenomenon."⁸⁹ He states that "it is a question not only of attacking the prevailing distribution of ownership, but the very right of differentiating ownership, especially by the means of production."⁹⁰ Because the privileged minority holds much of the decision-making power, they look out for their own needs in an attempt to maintain that position of privilege.

The dominance of the ideology of the powerful and the suppression of the ideas of the weak remains a key factor in the continuance of these oppressive systems. In a country where 75% of the population receives only one third of the national income, one must presume that this is not a voluntary choice on the part of that 75%.⁹¹ The poor are kept in a perpetual state of disempowerment and the rich in a perpetual situation of privilege.

Understanding the economic systems of which we are a part and our place within them becomes the first step in overcoming systemic injustice and inequality. The goal then of

⁸⁹ Jose Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974).

⁹⁰ Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, p.2.

⁹¹ Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, p.105.

liberation theology in Latin America is "not only to obtain a better standard of living, but also to be able to participate in the socio-economic resources and the decision-making process of the country" in order to gain control over their circumstance.⁹² This is in fact what all people strive for -- to have some control over their circumstance, at least on a basic level.

2. Christian Responsibility

This growing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is regarded by liberation theologians to be a "scandal and a contradiction to Christian existence."⁹³ It follows from this statement and from the earlier discussion of the golden rule as all-inclusive that to love the poor person as yourself amounts to ensuring that he or she is as filled as you are and that his or her basic needs are met.⁹⁴ This practice of economic love is often times referred to simply as "charity" within the Messianic tradition. If this practice of economic love were to replace the institutionalized economic systems of today, many of the inequalities that persist today would be erased.

⁹² Gutierrez, *Theology*, p.110.

⁹³ "Puebla Final Document," Section 28.

⁹⁴ Belo, *A Materialist Reading*, p.245.

The focus of many New Testament narratives, love for our neighbour demands a commitment to the cause of the oppressed.⁹⁵ The regional synod at Puebla adopted this position:

Confronted with the realities that are part of our lives today, we must learn from the Gospel that in Latin America we cannot truly love our fellow human beings, and hence God, unless we commit ourselves on the personal level, and in many cases on the structural level as well, to serving and promoting the most dispossessed and downtrodden human groups and social classes, with all the consequences that will entail on the plane of temporal realities.⁹⁶

Roberto Oliveros asserts the political dimension of the universality of loving one's neighbour when he writes:

Today's mission to create a society of sisters and brothers -- to love in history -- has a political dimension; this mission must be performed in a charity that, like Jesus' charity, subverts the social disorder and institutionalized injustice.
... the unity of human beings is achieved only by transcending the contradictions in which we find ourselves concretely situated. One must overcome the darkness that cancels the light.⁹⁷

Theologies of liberation in general maintain that "institutions bearing the Christian name must be dedicated to improving the conditions of society and providing for the welfare of its citizens by liberating them from health

⁹⁵ The most popular of which is the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. Recall also the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 among others.

⁹⁶ "Puebla Final Document," Section 327.

⁹⁷ Oliveros, "History of the Theology of Liberation," p.8.

deprivation" and that its focus is "the application of the tenets of Christianity to everyday life situations of the people with clear economic goals of more equitable distribution of land, property, and other forms of wealth."⁸⁸

In Mark 6, Jesus' rejection of the monetary system can indeed be paralleled to a rejection of the capitalist system in favor of a system in which the basic needs of all citizens are taken care of, perhaps a more socialist system. It is my opinion that the text contains an inherent message pertaining to fundamental entitlements of all people, which would include basic necessities such as food and shelter. In reference to Mark 6:30-44, Carlos Bravo states that Jesus does indeed care for the hungry, "He not only gives them the word of God but also *gives* them food in abundance. In this way he shows that God feeds his people and that physical needs, hunger and sickness, are a matter for the Kingdom."⁸⁹ If these issues are "a matter for the Kingdom" as Bravo insists they are, then the passage of Mark 6:30-44 does indeed reinforce notions of Christian responsibility to our fellow human beings politically, economically and socially to bring about a new society, that new kingdom, right here, right now.

⁸⁸ Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion*, Fourth Edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1992), p.130.

⁸⁹ Carlos Bravo, "Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Liberator" in *Mysterium Liberationis*, p.430.

For many this new kingdom is a just society founded on a fundamental belief in the dignity and equality of all people; these ideas have been expressed by secular society as a belief in human rights as set down in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, but that is not to say that this belief cannot be based in faith.¹⁰⁰ Upon examination, this passage in Mark sets forth similar guidelines for acceptable human behavior as those recorded in the UN declaration, and therefore the passage can be deemed to correspond to the concept of fundamental human rights, a notion that will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter. Although Bravo and other liberation theologians may have preferred the phrase "Christian responsibility" to the relatively new human rights terminology, they are essentially endorsing the same ideological messages of the equality of all people in both dignity and rights.

If we are to go back now to look at Mark 12 with this new reading of Mark 6 in mind, that narrative as well takes on an entirely different meaning. What is recognized by liberation theologians in regard to Mark 12 is a recognition of the impositions of the powerful on those less powerful. The

¹⁰⁰ *Puebla Final Document*, nos.1206-93, where a "just society" is described as a society in which human rights are respected. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is presented in its entirety in Appendix I of this thesis.

commands to GIVE jump out at us and reinforce the message of the previous narrative. Recall 12:17 which states "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." What if nothing really belongs to the emperor, nothing really belongs to anyone but God, what if we are all to share the wealth that God has bestowed upon us? Would that not change the meaning of this episode completely? The liberationist reading of Mark 6 puts a completely different slant on such narratives.

Such a liberationist interpretation so relevant to the here and now can be used to counter those readings such as Ed Norman's Christianity and the World Order. Norman, who regards "Christianity as being by nature concerned primarily with the relationship of the soul to eternity," is almost gnostic in his interpretation, taking so little of our existence here and now into account.¹⁰¹ He argues that belief in social change is not distinctively Christian but is instead merely a modern, liberal view.¹⁰² He even goes so far as to insist that a true Christian does not aspire to a better social order, a true Christian knows full well that human aspirations are incapable of fulfilment; he stresses the

¹⁰¹ Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.80.

¹⁰² Norman, *Christianity and the World Order*, pp.7-13.

relativity of all human achievements and criticizes those who fail to agree with him on this point.¹⁰³

Although critical of liberation theology, he does not offer nearly as rich an interpretation of Scripture, at least not one that speaks to those people suffering injustice in today's society.¹⁰⁴ Interpretations such as his, geared towards reward in an afterlife, do not speak to those poor and marginal individuals in the shantytowns of Latin America, nor do they speak to anyone living a present story of oppression and injustice. The liberationist reading is a much richer reading of the text and offers much more relevant meaning to those people of poor circumstance.

Conclusion

In response to my initial question (when we read Mark's account of the 'Feeding of the Five Thousand' from the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized, what do we see?), I have focused on two main points in this chapter. First of all, I have concentrated on the emphasis on giving through Jesus' espousal of the system of the gift, the extension of his table to all people, and his consideration of the effect upon the poor. And secondly, I have explored the possibility

¹⁰³ Norman, *Christianity and the World Order*, p.79.

¹⁰⁴ For more of Norman's criticism of liberation theology, see *Christianity and the World Order*, pp. 57 & 115.

of reading the narrative as a rejection of the capitalist system in general as an economic institution of systemic inequality.

If injustice is inherent in our social and economic systems as they exist at the present time, then how do we make a difference? The implications of the call for social change together with my liberationist interpretation of this narrative will be taken up in Chapter Three. There I will explore the importance of such a reading for particular social groups with concerns regarding race and ethnicity, women, human rights legislation, and the environment, all of which groups are attempting to bring about positive changes for their fellow human beings.

CHAPTER THREE

Implications of a Liberationist Reading for Social Justice Movements

Introduction

When we use the term "social movement", we are usually referring to a large group of people who are trying to bring about, or in some cases to resist, social change. The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology provides this definition of social movement:

The term covers various forms of collective action aimed at social reorganization. In general, social movements are not highly institutionalized, but arise from spontaneous social protest directed at specific or widespread grievances.¹⁰⁵

So, when I refer to "social justice movements", in general, I am referring to those movements which serve to question, challenge, and eliminate systemic injustices from political, economic and social institutions. Although one could easily say that individuals are prompted to social action by purely selfish reasons, the motivation which incites one to attempt to improve the life circumstance for other members of society is an entirely different matter and cannot be so easily

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1984), p.197.

discerned. Numerous starting points exist and are dependent upon the personal experiences of those moved to respond.

In Chapter One, the explanation of reader-response methodology established the importance of personal experiences, physical circumstance, and location in the process of interpreting a text, the importance of the reading site. Similarly, these same factors define one's outlook on life in general thereby influencing how one regards society in all its institutional forms. The variety of starting points corresponds to the multiplicity of positions or opinions prevalent in today's society.

It stands to reason, then, that people drawn together to pursue a common goal would have had common experiences in the past in order to have reached their current position. They have a common site perspective. This is what defines any given social group - common experiences and perspective. To be part of that group is to be a member of a community, an "interpretive community," and to be a member of that community is to feel empathy for others in that group and, in most cases, to feel compelled to help those in that community who may be in need.

In any case, motivation usually stems from strong beliefs, beliefs so strong that one is compelled to act on them. To say that these actions are sometimes based on religious belief is to say that religious belief provides the

point from which some members of social justice movements both question and challenge existing societal structures. These people are looking at the world from within the context of spiritual belief, in the case of liberation theologians from within the context of basic Christian foundations, and based on that standpoint challenging the structures of societal institutions, including those of the religious institutions themselves. When such challenges surface, the call for action, for social change, is regarded as a "natural outgrowth of their Christian commitment" or as a "fruit of faith."¹⁰⁶ Sociologist Ronald L. Johnstone suggests that the church has indeed come to be viewed by some as:

a source of radical change in society, with confrontation leading to subsequent reform and improvement, as religion is less concerned with individual sins but rather with society-wide structural abuses and imbalances.¹⁰⁷

More and more there is a refusal to relegate religion to the private sphere of individual faith and practice, and the support for the application of religion to the public sphere of community and business practices continues to grow. Religion is reaching out to touch, to influence, and to restructure the rest of society.

Liberationist messages such as those contained in the feeding narrative of Mark 6 can and are being utilized by

¹⁰⁶ Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, p.129.

¹⁰⁷ Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, p.132.

various social groups as a call to action, to begin implementing a new society which incorporates the ideas of sharing, giving, and equality as basic to its foundation and formation. Social justice movements such as racial and ethnic movements, the women's movement, advocates of human rights legislation, and environmental groups are applying biblical messages of equality and responsibility to society to further improve the daily life circumstances for members of their particular group, or in other words to further their cause.

My purpose in this chapter is not to judge the validity of this practice, although I do believe this to be a legitimate application of the text, but to demonstrate the motivational power and strength that this practice potentially holds. Faith-oriented or faith-based responses to social injustice do indeed have the power to change existing circumstances, perhaps in ways and areas that other sources of motivation do not. The main purpose of this third chapter then is to provide some examples of how social justice movements have been influenced by religious world views and vice versa, how theological precepts have been affected by these current modes of thought.

In order to maintain some control over the scope of this chapter, I have decided to deal with these social movements only as they relate to the realm of theological thought and religious studies, even more specifically to Christianity.

This indeed appears to be the most prudent approach to take because any attempt to delve any further into these social justice movements or into a variety of religious traditions is much too large an undertaking considering the availability of time and space to devote to such matters here.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, I will narrow my scope to that of the effect of the New Testament theme of liberation on issues relating to race and ethnicity, women, human rights legislation, and the environment.

Due to the immensity of material in each of these fields, and I use the word "material" loosely to refer to all the work begun, goals already achieved and those yet to be realized, and articles published to create awareness and foster empathetic attitudes, it is important to recognize that this chapter merely offers a brief glimpse at some of the issues deemed important by the respective social groups. The vast sea of information and opinion can only be touched upon here. In order to facilitate the process, I have arranged the chapter into four sections which will each deal with one of

¹⁰⁸ Numerous texts are devoted to the subject of liberation with regard to each of the world religions. For a sampling of ideas see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *World Religions and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Arlene Swidler, *Human Rights in Religious Traditions* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982); Mahnaz Afkhami, *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); and Roy Eckardt, *Black - Woman - Jew: Three Wars for Human Liberation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

the four groups specifically and in doing so take the following format: 1) locate the circumstance, the "reading site", and distinguish the main priorities of that particular group, 2) discuss the potential liberationist message of Mark 6 in relation to their cause, and 3) provide examples of action motivated by faith - liberative responses of the Christian community.

Racial and Ethnic Issues

Just as the Latin American people had been discovered, exploited and oppressed by colonialists, so too were many other peoples around the world. Native peoples of South America, North America, Africa, and elsewhere in the world suffered at the hands of colonialist governments and institutions. The indigenous aboriginal populations were, in most cases, forced to witness the destruction of their traditional world by the European settlers who exploited the land, resources, and institutions of that population for their own benefit. The indigenous people were forced to submit to the newcomers and to adapt to their societal systems. In the face of white domination, usually accompanied by violence, they were stripped of their freedom, their culture, and their traditional ways of life. Thus, a social system becomes

established which is characterized by external control and native dependence and justified by a racist ideology.¹⁰⁹

For many, colonialization brought an end to nomadic lifestyles as the land was claimed by Europeans and the native people were allocated reserves of land on which to continue their subsistence lifestyles, only this was not possible by virtue of the fact that they were no longer free to gather food in their traditional hunting and gathering manner. In Canada, native people living on reserves were forced to rely upon government support and the charity of religious groups. Government's attempt in recent years to integrate natives into the predominantly white society only alienated them more so, resulting in high suicide rates, alcohol and drug dependency, and poverty.

For South Africans, colonialization meant even more overt forms of institutionalized racism, those of the apartheid system and of slavery. Many people were taken to far away countries, separated from their family, sold for profit, and treated as the property of their owners, as non-persons, to do with as they pleased. These people were degraded, abused, and victims of racism, bigotry, and both physical and emotional acts of violence. To use Gutierrez's term introduced in

¹⁰⁹ James J. Teevan, ed., *Introduction to Sociology: A Canadian Focus*, Third Edition (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1989), p.194.

Chapter Two, they were treated as "non-persons." At home in South Africa, they endured a political system that did not even recognize their status as citizens. Black South African theologian Allan Aubrey Boesak describes the situation as follows:

This is the situation in which black people find themselves. Slavery, domination, injustice; being forced to live a life of contradiction and estrangement in their own country and 'in exile,' where fear and the urge to survive made deception a way of life; being denied a sense of belonging; discrimination -- all these were realities which have almost completely broken down the sense of worth of black personhood.¹¹⁰

Only recently have black South African people been granted the right to vote within their own country.

So yet again, the situation of oppressor and oppressed occurs in the form of racial discrimination and a situation of dependency results. The main priority of racial groups in their fight for justice is obviously equality and independence. After many years of hardship at the hands of their oppressors, they are demanding fair treatment across the board for all people and the right to self-determination, to participate in socio-economic resources and decision-making processes. We are all born equal in dignity and rights and society must reflect this.

¹¹⁰ Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977), p.29.

Liberation theology has the potential to influence many subjugated groups and deliver a message beneficial to their personal circumstance. The narrative of Mark 6:30-44 emphasizes systems of giving and sharing, the equality of all people, and criticisms of systemic injustice. The translation of this message in concrete terms to those approaching the text from a reading site of suffering racial discrimination is that Christianity does not tolerate the exploitation or oppression of people, it does not tolerate attitudes of inequality, it does not tolerate racial discrimination in any form. Christ's message is one of the equality of all people in the eyes of God. Consequently, the foundation of Christianity promotes a system based on sharing what one has with other human beings, rather than a system based on greed - a system of economic and racial equality, not financial dependence and racial discrimination. These messages can and have been interpreted by many races and ethnic groups as motivation to attempt to eradicate racist attitudes from our society and bring about a community that finds its foundation in precepts of equality and respect for fellow human beings and life in general.

Responses of distinct racial and ethnic groups vary. Some people find pertinent meaning in the traditional representation of Christianity, some delve beyond the traditional forms of Christianity in order to rediscover those

liberationist messages that are at its foundation, and others feel the need to search for answers elsewhere. In any case, of the utmost concern here are those responses based in faith that utilize spiritual belief as a point of departure from which to question and challenge economic, political, and religious institutions in the public sphere. These are the people that provide examples of social action motivated by faith.

For example, in North America, part of the mission of black churches has been to achieve societal reform on a large scale by prompting the predominantly white society to practice racial justice as an expression of a genuine understanding of the Christian faith. In 1970, theologian James H. Cone responded to his racial circumstance with a proposal for a "black theology of liberation" in which he too contends that Christianity is, in essence, a religion of liberation and that integral to Jesus' message is the struggle of the oppressed for political, social, and economic justice.¹¹¹ His response calls for a reform of black theology and church, reform that requires purging black churches of their most corrupting

¹¹¹ James H. Cone, *Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970). Cone's was regarded as a radical by many mainly because he speaks of a "black" God (pp.120-121); however, he does this mainly in a figurative sense to represent the total identification of God with black people and their plight. Allan Aubrey Boesak in *Farewell to Innocence* gives credit to Cone as the first black theologian to focus on liberation as the central message of the gospel, p.16.

suppressant, "their adoption of the 'white lie' that Christianity is primarily concerned with an other worldly reality," because this does not encourage members to act, to change this world.¹¹²

Black theological themes also make important contributions to Christian theological discussion and development. Olin P. Moyd offers his understanding of the term "redemption" as the embodiment of three ideas: 1) "liberation" from states of human-caused oppression, 2) "liberation" as salvation from sin, and 3) "confederation" with other people in a covenant relationship with each other and with God.¹¹³

However, not all oppressed people carry on within the Christian faith, some people feel the need to leave Christianity altogether when its rituals and institutions are seen as part of the problem of oppression. In Canada, some members of indigenous peoples have responded to their community's crisis by completely denouncing the Catholicism that was inflicted upon them when the white man invaded the land and by returning to their traditional ways. Although many of their traditional rituals have been lost over time,

¹¹² James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp.121 & 125.

¹¹³ Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Pudson Press, 1979).

some have been resurrected. Common themes that occur throughout Native American religion include the cyclical nature of life and time, the unity or inter-relatedness of all things, and a respect for nature and all living creatures; all that exists is inter-related and interdependent.¹¹⁴ Ideas such as these concur with our Christian notions of responsibility, equality, and "at-one-ment."¹¹⁵

Although this has been the response of some native people, many religious organizations have perceived the dissatisfaction among their congregations and attempted to respond to it. Catholicism, among other mainstream churches, confronted by its own irrelevance to the daily lives of many Canadians, has begun a process of self-examination and become more concerned with achieving God's kingdom on earth, concretely resulting in a new found interest in social justice

¹¹⁴ Ake Hultkrantz, *Native Religions of North America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). Also see John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), the life story of Oglala Sioux holy man Black Elk which stresses the importance of the symbolism of a circle to illustrate the connection between all things. In reality, these beliefs set forth here all have the same motivational force behind them; they too are religious beliefs and it is not necessary that the beliefs be Christian, merely that they be strong enough to compel someone to act for social change. For the sake of this study, I have refrained from exploring the examples within other religions simply due to limitations set forth earlier in this chapter.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Betty Sue Flowers, ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); Campbell refers to the original meaning of "atonement" as "at-one-ment," the state of feeling at one with the universe.

for Native Peoples and even in including traditional native rituals into church services.¹¹⁶

Having looked at a few instances of faith-based response where issues of race and ethnicity are concerned, I now deal with women's issues.

Women's Issues

Male domination of the female body is the basic material reality of women's lives; and all struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the struggle for actual control of one's own body, especially control over physical access to one's one body.¹¹⁷

As articulated in the above quotation by Andrea Dworkin, an everyday reality of women's lives is the struggle for physical control of one's body. In a society in which patriarchy has existed for such a long time, and by patriarchal society I mean both an ideology and social system in which women are subordinated to men, and younger men to older men, this is no easy task.¹¹⁸ Not only are centers of power in contemporary society largely economic as stated in

¹¹⁶ David L. Lewis, "Canada's Native Peoples and the Churches," *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*, W.E. Hewitt, ed. (Markham, Ontario: Butterworths, 1993), pp.248-249.

¹¹⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1981), p.170.

¹¹⁸ This definition of 'patriarchal' is that which Cheryl Exum employs in *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, p.9.

Chapter Two or largely white as indicated in the previous section by the examples of colonial domination, they are also largely male. It is this dominant male world view then that finds expression in the biblical text.

In the biblical tradition, women have occupied a subordinate role to that of men. In the Old Testament narratives, it is assumed that women are intellectually inferior and require supervision; women are regarded as the property of their fathers until they are married at which time they become the property of their husbands and, in their old age after their husbands are deceased, they become the responsibility of their sons.¹¹⁹ Denied any individual status or voice of their own, they are continually referred to in terms of their relationships to men: as wife, mother, daughter, and more often than not their names are not even mentioned. Women had no rights, only obligations and duties, their main duty being to bear children and provide sexual pleasure.¹²⁰ The text reflects the androcentric ideology of the society which it was produced by and for.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Numbers 30 and Deuteronomy 22:13-21.

¹²⁰ For statements on childbearing function see Genesis 30:23 and Numbers 5. For examples of female characters, see Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, Delilah and Samson's mother in Judges 13-16, Michal in 2 Samuel 6, and Bathsheba and a nameless victim of rape and dismemberment in Judges 19.

¹²¹ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p.11.

Many discriminatory customs are still found within Christian traditions such as routines in seating, admission to holy places, representation in religious schools, and access to ordination among other things. An inferior status has been accorded to women throughout the ages in most world religions; this is especially apparent in regulations concerning sexual assaults, birth control, abortion, divorce, child custody, and inheritance rights. Educational and political exclusion follows the pattern of ecclesiastical exclusion.

The influence of patriarchal society has been incorporated into the Christian tradition over the years but this is not to say that the concepts upon which Christianity was based contain such discriminatory foundations. It is for this reason that many people are looking back in an attempt to rediscover the foundations of Christian belief in order to challenge existing religious traditions that are not in adherence to them. So we find the basis of Christianity to be very different from the traditional forms it has taken through history due to cultural impositions as the church became an institution, an institution that conformed to the norms of the misogynist society of which it was a part.

Even many of the collections of articles on liberation theology fall into this patriarchal trap by not addressing the situation of women in church and in society, by not concerning themselves with male-female relationships, and by not

including female writers in their volumes. For example, Frontiers of Theology in Latin America provides the male perspective only and even acknowledges this directly in its preface which states:

Liberation theology is a richly variegated affair, both in its motifs and in the personalities involved. That fact gave rise to this volume, which seeks to provide an articulate, up-to-date, and representative sample for this new theological trend in the church and its main spokesmen.¹²²

Although the ideologically male-dominated framework in which liberation theology came into being did not expedite matters of concern for women, the female perspective was not neglected by all; Ana Maria Bidegain acknowledges those prominent figures such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff who insisted on the inclusion of female perspectives in the process of liberation theology.¹²³

Dr. Ana Maria Bidegain also "imports the urgency" of a "prophetic denunciation of the process of the feminization of poverty as a product of capitalism and of racism."¹²⁴ She

¹²² Rosino Gibellini, ed., *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, tran. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p.x. Emphasis added. Like many other volumes compiled at the time, this volume contains articles of men; few include the opinions of women.

¹²³ Ana Maria Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," in *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, Elsa Tamez, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p.28.

¹²⁴ Bidegain, p.29.

repeats statistics reported in 1980 by the United Nations Organization which state that women constitute one half of the world population, spend twice as much time at work as men do, receive one-tenth of the world's income, and possess less than one percent of the world's wealth.¹²⁵ She attributes the impoverishment of women in part to notions of motherhood and to discrimination with regard to work and wages and describes the feminization of poverty as a consequence of sexism and racism.¹²⁶

Liberation theology has influenced feminist interpretations of biblical narratives, feminist thinkers within the church, and the plight of women in general. Themes of sharing, giving, all-inclusiveness, equality, and the subversive nature of Marcan Jesus in addressing instances of systemic injustice, all provide the women's movement with ammunition to wage their own battle in the fight for liberation. The application of such themes to the sexual discrimination accorded women in patriarchal societies and in traditional Christianity reveals a clear message -- women occupy not a submissive role but a position tantamount to that of men. The Marcan Jesus permitted women to listen and respond to his teaching and even to accompany him while

¹²⁵ Bidegain, p.31.

¹²⁶ Bidegain, p.31.

travelling. In Luke he also allowed women to support him financially.¹²⁷ The prominence of women in the ministry of Jesus continued even after his death as women provided their houses so that followers could gather to worship and pray. Through the teachings, actions, and ministry of Jesus, a format for equality is revealed.¹²⁸

Unfortunately, this has been recognized only by a slight few throughout the history of the church. An exception for his time (around 180 A.D.), Clement of Alexandria, described divine nature as follows:

... men and women share equally in perfection, and are to receive the same instruction and the same discipline. For the name 'humanity' is common to both men and women; and for us 'in Christ there is neither male nor female.'¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Nancy Nason-Clark, "Gender Relations in Contemporary Christian Organizations," in *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*, p.219.

¹²⁸ Cf. Mark 5:21-43. See also Luke 10:38-42 and John 4:1-42.

¹²⁹ Cited from E. Pagels, "God the Father, God the Mother," *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp.67-68. Clement is referring here to Galatians 3:28, which states "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ," one of the Pauline texts attributed genuine authorship. There has been much debate about the attitude of Paul towards women; however, when we look at those letters deemed truly Pauline (Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and Philemon) Paul's statements regarding women are seen to be quite favourable and progressive for his time. The confusion enters into the picture because of the Deutero-Pauline texts, those which scholarship now attributes to other writers, for they do contain statements that endorse the subjugation of women. Any such occurrences within the genuine Pauline texts are deemed

More recently, Denise Carmody writes:

Jesus treats men and women simply as individuals who need his help, or as co-workers, or friends. He offers women no separate but equal way of works; he compiles no segregating list of feminine virtues. In the face of considerable opposition, and with the consequence of provoking scandal, Jesus associates with the outcasts and marginal people of his day; the poor, sinners, tax collectors, lepers -- and women.¹³⁰

This format, unfortunately, has been distorted by male visions of power and domination over the opposite sex. Aracely de Rocchietti, a Methodist pastor in Uruguay, writes:

I think it is highly important to continue analysis of that initial urge of Jesus to open up a new scenario for the marginalized -- women among them -- because that urge has been repeatedly distorted and lost sight of in the life of the Church. We must not forget that the word of God was spoken by the people but *interpreted, thought, put into writing, and transmitted* by the powerful of all ages: learned doctors, scribes, priests, kings, fathers of the Church; that the life of the Church necessarily had to develop within the prevailing structures in which Jesus was someone who belonged to the "counter culture"; that from its start, the Church trying to proclaim the Gospel of Christ was assimilating structures of power which it ultimately came to adopt for its own institutional structure as it grew.¹³¹

to be additions made to the text at a later time by leaders in the church in an attempt to incorporate established societal modes of behavior into Christianity. For an in depth discussion of this topic see Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teachings of Paul: Selected Issues* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

¹³⁰ Denise Carmody, *Women and World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p.115.

¹³¹ Aracely de Rocchietti, "Women and the People of God," in *Through Her Eyes*, p.104.

The rediscovery of the attitudes of Jesus himself offers a route through which women can travel to empower themselves, take control of their own lives, and bring about social change. The main priority of the women's movement is that all people be treated equally regardless of their sex, that they receive equal status and treatment within economic, political, and religious systems. So, the ideal social system then becomes one in which economic, racial, and sexual discrimination are eliminated.

Similar to the responses within various racial and ethnic communities, the response of female voices range from those content with extracting meaning from those exceptional female images within the existing tradition although they are few, to those attempting to rediscover that egalitarian gospel message that Jesus both lived and preached which is at the foundation of the Christian religion, to those completely disillusioned by the institution whose liberation can only come from a total break with the tradition. All of these responses are indeed motivated by belief and have the potential to improve the daily life circumstance for members of their community.

For example, although theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether seeks reform of existing structures of the Roman Catholic church, she remains a member. Pointing to instances of female leadership and contributions within the church as a path to reshaping the vision and life of the church, she refers to her

approach as one of "radical obedience" and believes recovery of a "true balance" between male and female is possible if the church rids itself of the concept of women as passive.¹³²

Mary Daly, on the other hand, is much more critical of the sexist perceptions, views, and practices of the Roman Catholic church and proposes a religious "exodus" from that community in order to establish a different model, one in which there is no male God, no sex stereotyping, and one which invalidates patriarchal religion.¹³³ She has made such extreme statements as to say that "a woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan."¹³⁴

As previously mentioned in Chapter One, Mieke Bal finds traditional interpretations of biblical narratives problematic and in many cases not only inadequate but oftentimes faulty. She insists that Christian, Western culture has perpetuated a myth, "a dominant reading" of the Biblical narrative, one that is male-centered, one that incorporates a misogynist view and

¹³² Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women's Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Continuity and Change," in *Women of Spirit*, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), pp.19-28.

¹³³ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (London: Harper and Row, 1968); Cf. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

¹³⁴ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex: With a New Feminist Postchristian Introduction* (London: Colophon Books, 1975), p.6.

denies the importance of women. Her analysis of text and tradition in Lethal Love uncovers those problematic instances in the culturally accepted version of events and she arrives at alternative interpretations, thereby making a case for "difference" as a means of deconstructing the dominance of male-centered readings.¹³⁵ So, in applying this deconstructionist method to biblical narratives from a feminist perspective, Mieke Bal is asserting both her voice and method in an attempt to recover essential messages from the text and, in the process, to uncover more favorable images of women from the stories. Her actions, although she is acting from outside the religious institution itself, can only benefit women's movements for equal and fair treatment within Christianity.

¹³⁵ Perhaps I should further explain Bal's method of analysis in *Lethal Love* and what results from it. Bal uses the phrase "process of mythification" to refer to what happens for narratives to get misrepresented in this way. Gaps exist in a story; most commonly, the motivation behind the actions of a character may be omitted. The patriarchal culture, of which we are all a part, tends to look at things in terms of binary opposites and to assign moral judgements. Because of the patriarchal tendencies of the culture, the reading is most likely to assign positive characteristics or judgements to the male characters and negative ones to the female characters. Commentators then justify the moral judgements assigned by filling in the gaps with particular motivations that naturalize the moral judgement already assigned. The average reader today does not recognize the fact that these motivations and judgements are not presented in the original story, but have been imposed on it by society and then accepted as correct. Criticizing the myth then necessitates undoing the popular reading of judgements and attempting to replace the seemingly self-evident motivations with others.

Other examples of women attempting to reform church policies and practices from within, besides Ruether, include Phyllis Tribble and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, both of whom recognize the liberating potential of the Christian faith and identify its essential message to be not the sanctity of patriarchy but liberation for all people, regardless of sex.¹³⁶ Tribble finds sufficient ground in Christianity to hope and work for church reform. Fiorenza insists that feminist "herstorians" can indeed rediscover the theme of liberation within the exodus from Israel, the prophetic plea for justice made by Jesus, and his concern for the poor and oppressed.¹³⁷ These women are rereading the Biblical text from a reading site based in women's experience.

The struggle of women within the church was acknowledged in Canada in 1936 with the ordination of the first female minister Lydia Gruchy. Today, the United Church boasts the highest percentage of ordained women of any Christian denomination within Canada with 25% of its ministers being

¹³⁶ Phyllis Tribble, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread" and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Women in the Early Christian Movement," both of which can be found in *Womanspirit Rising*, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).

¹³⁷ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1985).

female; other mainstream churches are not far behind.¹³⁸ However, the struggle does not end there as placement and career opportunities still present problems even after ordination. And, numerous people continue to stereotype members' societal roles on the basis of sex both inside and outside the church.

Human Rights Issues

All of the above social justice issues could very well come under the broader umbrella of "human rights" issues. Liberation issues, racial and ethnic issues, and women's issues are all human rights issues. What, then, are human rights issues? What are human rights?

In simplest terms, human rights are those inherent rights of all people born into this world. John Langan defines human rights as follows:

A human right is a right that a person has simply by virtue of being a human person, irrespective of his or her social status, cultural accomplishments, moral merits, religious beliefs, class memberships, or cultural relationships.¹³⁹

So, wherever discrimination against race, ethnicity, sex, class, religion, or age exists, fundamental human rights are

¹³⁸ Nancy Nason-Clark, p.226.

¹³⁹ John Langan, "Defining Human Rights: A Revision of the Liberal Tradition," in *Human Rights in the Americas*, Alfred Hennely and John Langan, eds. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1982).

being denied. Where freedom of expression, opinion, and speech is denied, where imprisonment without due process, mass rapes, and mass genocide are realities, there is a denial of human rights. Wherever there is economic desperation and a lack of social systems in place to guard against starvation, poverty, homelessness, and unemployment, wherever there is no protection of children, aged, handicapped, sick, or infirm, where there is not proper education, there is a denial of human rights. No access to prevention of treatable diseases, to sex education, to prenatal care, to medically safe abortions, all of these things are considered to be human rights violations.

These violations are deemed so because they do not adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948 nor do they adhere to various other human rights documents.¹⁴⁰ The UN document was drafted in response to the atrocities committed during World War II and it provided guidelines for governments to follow to ensure the basic entitlements of all people. Of the thirty articles in the document, twenty-three deal with political and civil rights while seven deal with

¹⁴⁰ The United Nations Universal Declaration is provided in its entirety in Appendix I of this thesis. For this and other human rights documents see Ian Brownlie, ed., *Basic Documents on Human Rights*, Third Edition (Toronto: Clarendon Press, 1992).

economic rights which cannot be secured by national governments alone but depend on economic resources of the state. J. Robert Nelson recognizes that:

Certain nations are so utterly poor that they can hardly begin to provide for all social, economic, and cultural rights so defined. Others, of whatever degree of wealth, can satisfy the claims only by a relative equalizing of resources so as to achieve a leveling of expenditure for the good things required and desired by all. Certainly this kind of general sharing is in accord with the Christian belief about mutual support in a motivating attitude of love.¹⁴¹

His recognition of the relative dependence of the ensurance of human rights on the economic circumstance of a particular state and his appraisal of the Christian belief of mutual support correspond to those ideas set forth in Chapter Two.

Nelson also states that a "concern for the integrity, worth and dignity of persons is the basic presupposition of human rights," that three personal freedoms are requisite: freedom of conscience, freedom from unjust exploitation or oppression, and freedom to live a properly human life, and that Christian faith affirms those freedoms.¹⁴² To quote Arlene Swidler:

The term 'human rights' is comparatively new. Neither the term nor the concept is traditional in religious thought. Nevertheless, human rights represent what is probably the

¹⁴¹ J. Robert Nelson, "Human Rights in Creation and Redemption: A Protestant View," in *Human Rights in Religious Traditions*, Arlene Swidler, ed. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), p.7.

¹⁴² Nelson, p.1.

primary ethical concern in the world today. And, dealing as they do with our basic understanding of what it means to be human, what we are doing on this earth, and how we ought to relate to one another, human rights are at the center of religious thought and practice.¹⁴³

The report of the World Council of Churches consultation of 1974 at St. Polten, Austria, provided a general theological basis for human rights when it stated that:

It is our conviction that the emphasis of the Gospel is upon the value of all human beings in the sight of God, on the atoning and redeeming work of Christ that has given to man his true dignity, on love as the motive for action, and on love for one's neighbour as the practical expression of an active faith in Christ."¹⁴⁴

Similarly, the Fifth Assembly of the Council at Nairobi, Kenya, in 1975 identifies causes which create the conditions under which human rights are denied including economic exploitation, political manipulation, military power, class domination, and psychological conditioning.¹⁴⁵ In order to eliminate human rights violations, both the symptoms and the root causes must be dealt with. Again, the resultant themes of our liberationist reading offer an alternative, a system

¹⁴³ Arlene Swidler, *Human Rights in Religious Traditions*, introduction, p. vii.

¹⁴⁴ Found in the text *Human Rights and Christian Responsibility*, Report of the Consultation, St. Polten, Austria, 21-26 October 1974 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975). The World Council of Churches is widely representative of Protestant Christians.

¹⁴⁵ David M. Paston, ed., *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), p.102.

based on sharing and giving, based on equality, the extension of the table to include all people, and responsibility to our neighbours to provide a just system in which to live.

Two well-known examples of people whose actions were motivated by both Christian faith and a belief in basic human rights are Baptist clergymen and social activists Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson, both of whom were prominent figures in the black Civil Rights movement, challenging segregation laws, organizing peaceful demonstrations, publicizing their message of equality, and in the process risking their own personal safety for the sake of a larger task.

Perhaps the most prominent example outside of scholarship of a person motivated by the Christian faith and responsibility in this day and age is Mother Teresa, who lives the directive to "love thy neighbour." Born in Skopje, Macedonia (at the time in the Ottoman Empire) in 1910, she travelled to India in 1928 as a missionary, where she taught at a convent school in Calcutta, later became principal of that school, but in 1948 left it to work alone in the slums. She opened a school for destitute children in Calcutta, was gradually joined by other nuns, and then opened her House for the Dying in 1952. In 1957, she started work with lepers and in many other disaster areas of the world. Mother Teresa has

championed the cause of underprivileged people irrespective of race, gender, age, or physical condition.

However, we must not become too selfish by limiting our responsibility to the needs, interests, and rights of individuals; we must also consider the needs, interests, and rights of the planet itself. Environmental issues play a role in this picture as well.

Environmental Issues

In recent years, the spread of technology may have benefitted human beings but only to the detriment of the planet. Global health and future resources have been damaged in many ways. Resource depletion, air and water pollution, global warming, overpopulation, nuclear dangers, and the accumulation of toxic wastes are just a few of the unnecessary strains inflicted upon the earth by the human population. We have cut down 60% of the world's forest, drastically altered the atmosphere, and in the process ultimately endangered the survival of many species including our own.¹⁴⁶ Do we not have a responsibility to future generations to preserve and care for the environment upon which we depend for survival?

¹⁴⁶ For similar ideas see Kenneth Westhues, "Religion and the Environment," *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*, pp.197-198, where he claims that people have altered the environment so much that there is no such thing as "pure nature" anymore.

In reality, we have been living beyond our means, beyond the earth's means. Our arrogant dominance over the earth's bounty has landed us in a situation of ecological disaster. We must begin to think and act in a global context in which sustainable development is a priority. Current circumstances demand a re-evaluation of our attitude and actions towards the environment. According to John Carmody, our current situation demands a "new Christian theology of nature."¹⁴⁷

Carmody is of the opinion that today's ecological problems should be regarded as a matter both "deeply religious and humanistic" and that expression of the Christian faith should include love of nature as a neighbour.¹⁴⁸ Here the concept of "neighbour" applies to not only all people but also to all the earth; Jesus' symbolic table of Mark 6 extends to all people, all the earth, and all its natural elements. Christian naturalist ethics then stress preservation, future generations, the globe's carrying capacity, population control, genuine need, and appropriate technologies.¹⁴⁹

In the text Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic, Hans Küng discusses the role religion can play as

¹⁴⁷ John Carmody, *Ecology and Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), esp. pp.164-166.

¹⁴⁸ Carmody, *Ecology and Religion*, p.5 & p.166.

¹⁴⁹ Carmody, *Ecology and Religion*, p.142.

a motivator for moral action.¹⁵⁰ K  ng also identifies "solidarity with the environment" as one of his postmodern requirements for social world order and he urges people to abandon notions of human domination over or separation from nature, to relinquish lifestyles which violate the integrity of nature for the sake of private interests, and to initiate a world order in partnership with nature.¹⁵¹

So, the messages of the extension of the table, the equality of all things under God, and the all-inclusiveness of Christian responsibility effect environmental issues as well. If responsibility to our neighbours include future generations, injustices to the environment are injustices to our neighbours of tomorrow. The rights of humans are slowly being extended to include the protection of the total environment. Our definition of community is being extended to include all creatures on earth, all aspects of our environment.

More and more, Christians are focusing on environmental issues. Kenneth Westhues points to those individuals

¹⁵⁰ Hans K  ng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), pp.58-59.

¹⁵¹ K  ng, *Global Responsibility*, pp.67-69. K  ng's social world order requires not just freedom, but also justice; not just equality, but also plurality; not just brotherhood, but also sisterhood; not just co-existence, but also peace; not just productivity, but also solidarity with the environment; and not just toleration, but also ecumenism.

influenced by the import of such issues such as R.F. Schumacher, Barbara Ward, and Thomas Berry.¹⁵² For example, Berry, author of The Dream of the Earth, which was published by one of the most influential environmental organizations in the United States, is a Catholic priest but nowhere is this mentioned in his book.¹⁵³

What we are left with is the notion of responsibility to both other people and our surroundings. The equality of all living beings demands nothing less.

Conclusion

In this third and final chapter, I have attempted to illustrate some implications of liberationist readings of the New Testament for social justice movements. Religious belief does have the potential to motivate members of community to act, to bring about social change. Hans Küng credited religion with similar motivational power:

Religions can provide a supreme norm for conscience, that categorical imperative which is immensely important for today's society, an imperative which obligates in quite a different depth and fundamental way.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Westhues, p.207.

¹⁵³ Westhues, p.207 in reference to Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

¹⁵⁴ Küng, *Global Responsibility*, p.58.

The location of a particular social group affects the manner in which the text is read, the message received from it, and the application of that interpretation in the context of life. Christian commitment then takes numerous forms of social action determined by the reader's particular interests, whether pertaining to race, ethnicity, sex, human rights in general, or the environment. Liberationist messages from the New Testament are being utilized by members of society to bring about a new society that is based on the precepts of sharing, equality, and responsibility. This chapter merely touches on a few instances of such action motivated by belief.

CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with the supposition that questioning is basic to human activity and the questions that one formulates limit the possible responses that can be given. If the question determines the response, a similar statement can be made regarding the reading site, the reading site determines the question. I have sought to illustrate the truth of such a statement in this thesis by focusing on the reader-response methodology of biblical criticism, the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized, and religious belief as a motivator for action in society.

I have attempted to illustrate the importance of the reader in the act of interpretation by focusing on Mark's account of "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" in Mark 6:30-44 in particular by way of my initial question: When we read Mark's account of "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" from the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized, what do we see? The preceding chapters sought a response to this question first by defining the method and stressing the importance of the reading site of the interpreter, second by providing a liberationist reading of the narrative, and third by analysing the implications of such a reading for various social groups.

In Chapter One, "The Development of Biblical Criticism," I followed biblical criticism from its points of origin to present-day methods. This led me to such literary critical methods as reader-response criticism, which then became the focus of my thought. The significance of the reader's location, circumstance, and perceptions took on the utmost of importance.

Chapter Two provided a liberationist reading of the Marcan narrative based on the reading site of the oppressed and marginalized of Latin America. This interpretation of the story emphasized notions of sharing and giving, the all-inclusive extension of God's table, and the effect this message held for the poor. The subversive nature of Jesus' actions and the implicit critiques of systemic injustice began to emerge from the pages of the text. These are the things we see when we look at the story from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized thereby communicating to the reader a much more relevant meaning for this life, this world.

In the final chapter, I looked at the implications of such liberationist readings of the biblical text for social justice movements attempting to bring about a just society in this world. The notions of community and responsibility hold much meaning for racial and ethnic groups, women's groups, advocates of human rights legislation, and environmentalists. Possibly a motivating factor for many, religious belief

grounded in a rereading of Biblical texts has the potential to move people to respond, to react to societal injustices. Thus we see the power of a 'liberating exegesis' of the text: ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω ("Let the reader understand," Mark 13:14)!

APPENDIX I

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
(Approved by the United Nations General Assembly
on December 10, 1948)

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, therefore,

The General Assembly

Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these

rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11

1. Everyone charged with a penal offense has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to the law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offense on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offense, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.

2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and return to his country.

Article 14

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecution genuinely arising from nonpolitical crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.

2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and its dissolution.

2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through natural effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each state, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same special protection.

Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

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